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ABSTRACT

Because spelling errors affect the writer's word choice and the writer's audience, college students who are otherwise good writers are often placed in remedial English classes. Despite its relationship to audience concerns, word choice, and the physical act of writing, spelling has not been of much concern to composition teachers. Research in the area of spelling, conducted by reading teachers at the primary and elementary levels where problems begin, has shown that students must change their attitudes about spelling before any great improvement in skills can take place and must develop a sense of the logical structure of prefixes, suffixes, and base words. Because so many entering students at the University of New Haven (Connecticut) are placed in a developmental composition course due to their poor spelling, a project has been proposed to improve students' attitudes about their spelling skills and to improve their visual memory and auditory skills where spelling is concerned using a list of 500 words. The subjects would be those who score nine or more errors per 300 words on a pretest essay. Pretest and posttest data would be analyzed to determine the percentage of improvement for each student, against the scores of a control group of students not participating in the project. (A list of spelling errors made by students in the developmental composition course is attached.) (HTH)

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SPELLING: EASING THE STUDENT'S ANXIETY AND IMPROVING HIS/HER SKILL

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SPELLING: EASING THE STUDENT'S ANXIETY AND IMPROVING HIS/HER SKILL

Introduction to the Problem

Each year approximately 200 of the University of New Haven's entering students are enrolled in Fundamentals, a developmental composition course. Such students write a pretest essay during the first week of the course and a posttest essay during the final week of the course. The essay tests are graded using an analytic scale which awards fifty points to a paper that has less than ten proofreading errors per 300 words. Some students who are particularly poor spellers fail the pretest, and sometimes the posttest, largely on the basis of their lack of spelling skill. For example, nine of the nineteen students who are enrolled in the spring 1981 daytime section of Fundamentals failed the pretest primarily on the basis of their spelling difficulties. Since the composition course does not focus on spelling, such students may well not improve their weakest skill even though they attend the class.

I've cited a problem that has persisted at the University of New Haven for many years. I think that spelling has also been a problem for many years on many other campuses. In an article discussing spelling, Edmund Henderson, Director of the McGuffey Reading Center in 1974, recalled his early college days when he was placed in a section of "Dummy English", not because he couldn't read or write well, but because he couldn't spell. (1974, p. 177)

In addition to the problem of the student's inability to spell correctly, there is also the problem of deciding who should deal with spelling instruction and research. Should reading teachers be solely responsible? Reading instruction is certainly concerned with the identification of words, but as Frank Smith (1973) has noted, a good reader does not concern himself/herself with the letter-by-letter identification of words. On the other hand, during the act of editing, a part of the composing process, a writer sometimes must either deal with the

question of how to spell a difficult word or decide to select a different word that he/she can spell. Spelling, therefore, is not only a part of the physical act of writing but also sometimes a factor in word choice. Spelling also affects the writer's audience. That is often the very reason students who are otherwise good writers are placed in remedial English classes: an instructor has read the students' placement essays and has been distracted by the numerous spelling errors. Not only English instructors but also general readers are disturbed by poor spelling. At a recent conference of New England Writing Lab Directors, Philip Szenher of Roger Williams College in Rhode Island, stated that 32 of 46 general faculty members surveyed on his campus indicated spelling as the biggest writing problem exhibited by their students.

Despite the fact that spelling appears to be related to the audience concerns, word choice, and physical act of writing, spelling has not been of much concern to composition researchers. Barbara Gray and Virginia Slaughter (1980), in a recent book discussing basic skills, note that "despite the fact that students identify vocabulary and spelling as their primary weaknesses in writing, those two areas of language study have been left surprisingly untouched by college faculty." (p.62) This statement seems to be an accurate summation of the state of college-level spelling instruction and research, particularly research. At present many well known writing texts at least provide a section devoted to spelling. For example, even Peter Elbow, who advocates repeated free writes with no concern for spelling does recognize the need for editing during the final drafting stage and suggests a few good spelling texts in the appendix of Writing Without Teachers. On the other hand, notable researchers in the area of composition have not identified spelling as an important concern. In a volume of composition research compiled by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer (1963), the writers state:

> Research in spelling is barely touched upon in this report for the simple reason that, however important accurate spelling may be in the clarity and social acceptability of composition, many of the factors of good spelling do not seem to be closely involved with the factors of good composition. (p.50)

They go on to cite studies conducted with elementary school children. In these studies, instruction based upon prepared spelling lists proved to be more effective than instruction based upon words chosen from children's compositions. The most readily apparent problem with such research, of course, is that results of studies conducted with elementary school children may not be readily generalized to include college students. Also, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer state that good spelling and good composition do not hold many factors in common, but they do not investigate possible factors that are held in common. They are not, however, the only notable researchers of the opinion that spelling is peripheral to the writing process. Janet Emig also dismisses spelling as something not very basic to writing: "Capitalization, spelling, punctuation - these are touted as the basics in writing when they represent, of course, merely the convention, the amenities for recording the outcome of the process." (1978, p. 59) Nevertheless, anyone who has ever observed a poor speller engaged in writing should have a difficult time believing that spelling is not part of the writing process. Most of us have at one time watched a student repeatedly try to correct the spelling of a word, but then use a substitute, or we have overheard a peer writing partner saying, "What's this sentence mean? I can't figure out this word."

The problem, consequently, is twofold. Before, as college-level writing instructors and researchers, we can begin to work alone or with reading teachers in solving the problem of aiding poor spellers, who are sometimes labeled more generally as poor writiers, we must first accept some share of the responsibility for researching and teaching spelling. If, as writing instructors, we hold students

accountable for correct spelling, should we not also hold ourselves responsible for researching and teaching the subject?

Review of the Relevant Literature

Although composition researchers have not done much work in the area of spelling, research has been conducted by reading teachers, largely at the primary and elementary school levels. The problem for poor spellers certainly starts at the primary and elementary school levels when they develop their reading and writing skills. Maturational factors, such as auditory/visual discrimination, blending ability and dominance/directional confusion, often interfere in word analysis. As a result of these early developmental difficulties, some bright high school and college students exhibit poor spelling, writing and reading skills. (Roswell and Natchez, 1964, 18-19) Even though these are often simply developmental problems, and, consequently, ones that can be outgrown by children, in the case of poor spellers, normal maturation does not occur. The normal experimenting that Noam Chomsky (1970) has noted children go through in learning the logic of our language is damaged by their anxiety and lack of confidence. Furthermore, Hayakawa (1979) has observed that once a student begins to define himself/herself as a bad speller, that selfconcept will determine the way in which the individual behaves and develops. Abrams and Smolen (1973), psychologists, have explained the perpetuation of such language problems as a cyclical process that begins with stress, which causes feelings of inadequacy, which, in turn, causes a lack of concentration. The lack of concentration prevents the student from improving his/her language skills, and the cycle begins again with feelings of stress.

Several studies have supported the concept that a student must change his/her attitude before any great improvement in spelling skill can take place. Bradley Loomer (1978) cited notable studies conducted by Columba (1926), Diserens and Vaughn (1931), Forlano (1936), E. Horn (1960, 1967), D. Russell (1937), Sand (1938)

and Thorndike (1935), all of which indicate that intrinsic incentives, such as positive attitude and interest, are more important than extrinsic factors, such as competition and grades, in improving a student's spelling. In our own workshops at the University of New Haven we have found that the poor speller's attitude can be improved by allowing each student to discuss his/her feelings regarding spelling, explaining the developmental sources of spelling difficulties, and allowing each student to provide his/her own misspelled words for study.

In addition to altering a student's attitude toward spelling, an instructor must also be concerned with instructional methods by which to improve a student's skill. Researchers have tested various instructional methods that were based upon developing a writer's linguistic logic, visual memory or auditory skills. Students, according to Nancy and Robert Hartman (1973), are either auditory or visual learners. Greene and Petty (1968) have developed a systematic approach that builds both auditory and visual skills:

1) Look at the word and say it.
2) Cover the word with your hand and try to reproduce it as you saw it.
3) Uncover and check the word.
4) Look at the word and pronounce it correctly.
5) Cover it and write it again.
6) Look again and see if it is spelled correctly.
7) When you can cover the word and write it correctly, you may go on to the next word.

A systematic approach of this sort is also important in giving the poor speller confidence that there is some way of dealing with the study of difficult words.

Students also need to develop a sense of the logical structure of prefixes, suffixes and base words. According to Henderson (1974), a growing awareness of the logic of the language is a normal part of the psycholinguistic development of children. Such knowledge is certainly essential to good spellers. For example, J.N. Scott (1976), points out that if "complete" is a word that a speller knows, and the instructor indicates the relationship to "competent", the speller will be less likely to spell the word "compatent" or "compitent." (p. 679)

S.L. Stotsky has also worked with college students in teaching the elements of word formation on the basis of their clear visibility, high productivity, and familiarity to the learner. For example, a hyphenated form, such as pre-Civil War, shoulc be taught before a less visible form, such as preference. She also suggests formulating exercises to combine roots and prefixes to form words. This is similar in concept to sentence-combining. For example, if a student knows the meaning of pre and the meaning of season, he/she can rewrite a statement regarding a game that occurs before the regular season so that it refers simply to a "pre-season game."

Finally, the research has given some indication of instructional methods that have not proven to be useful. Teaching rules, according to Ernest Horn (1960), is not useful unless the rules hold true at least 80 percent of the time. Horn suggests that students should learn the rules for adding suffixes and the rules for doubling the final consonant. Other rules, including those regarding syllabication and phonics, have too many exceptions to be useful for a student to memorize.

Sample and Design of a Proposed Study

Although many students at the University of New Haven need help with their spelling skills, the population for a proposed study will be restricted to students who score nine or more errors per 300 words on their pretest essay. From this group, enough students will be randomly selected to form, in the fall of 1981, four groups of five to ten students each and, in the spring of 1982, two groups of five to ten students each.

Instructors and Instructional Procedure

The instructors who teach the spelling sessions will be reading teachers and writing teachers who work in the Learning Assistance Center.

The basis for instruction will be a list of 500 words that will be gathered from the misspelled words written by students on their pretest essays from Fundamentals. The course of instruction will involve several steps in teaching the students to

spell the list of 500 words. First, students will be alerted to causes of spelling problems, such as letter reversals, which are common in the learning development of children, especially boys. The workshop instructor will seek to alleviate the students' anxiety over the cause of the spelling problem by assuring them that since their physical development has been completed, they can now become better spellers, just as they can learn, through practice, any other skill. Next, students will begin to study the list of 500 words, broken into individual lessons of approximately thirty words each. Students will study the thirty-word units in a visual and then an auditory manner. They will be taught to improve their visual memory by covering a word, trying to spell it, and checking the results. Students will strengthen their visual perception by learning to write accurately and also check their work accurately. At the end of each lesson, a Learning Assistance Center instructor will also check their work for accuracy. Finally, tapes will help students to develop their auditory skills. Students will listen to each word as it is carefully pronounced in syllables and then spell the word on a sheet of paper. The tape recorder will spell each word for the student to check his/her work. If the word has silent letters or a pronunciation that is misleading, the source, such as a foreign word, will be explained, and the student will be reminded that visual memory must be used at times. The student will also be asked how the word would be pronounced if it were pronounced as it is spelled. This will provide a link between a student's auditory and visual skills. Students will also use the tapes to check answers to word-combining exercises of the sort suggested by Stotsky (1980). Students will be encouraged to practice in the above ways until they have mastered the words assigned each week.

Data Collection, Analysis and Evaluation

Two types of pre-posttest data will be collected and analyzed. The pre-posttest scores on the 500 word spelling test will be analyzed to determine the

percentage of improvement for each student following instruction. More importantly, the pre-posttest spelling error rate scored by each student in a 300 word essay will be recorded. The students who were not randomly selected for participation in the workshop sessions will serve as a control group. The data from the control group and the data from the workshop group will be submitted to analysis of variance.

Expected Outcomes

The project will seek to improve each participant's spelling of a list of 500 words common to a freshman's vocabulary. More importantly, the study will seek to improve the students' general method of spelling and attitude toward spelling so that the workshop students show a significant improvement in their spelling error rate when compared with students in the control group. The study will also engage both the reading instructors and writing instructors in the common concern of spelling research and, perhaps, increase the likelihood of their cooperation on future projects.

SPELLING ERRORS MADE BY E-103 STUDENTS

sencire
phisically
hollyday
performence
beg
acheive
there
plesent
yeild
evidance
tryed
dangerious
a women
reallity
commutor
route/rute
therefor
tooken
catagorey
feild
fictious
realise/relize
colleage
moter
to
attude
exsist
alot/allot
speachless
creatur
inocent
extremly
illegle
sholder
beggin
herd
attension

towars
tendence
habbit
mechine
strick
intrest
inaguaration
imidiate
it's
veiwer
wide spread
themself
safty
toche
stuborn
befor
aquire
realise
prejugdice
tounge
contraversial
comeing
to gether
felling
falt
controle
dump
occassion
wheter/weather
truely
begining
acuse
recieve
admitt
peticular
soudenly
dreme

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